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TORONTOIST

Historicist: Socialite and Nazi Spy

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Toronto's Grace Buchanan-Dineen's life of intrigue and espionage in Detroit.

BY KEVIN PLUMMER



Detail of Grace Buchanan-Dineen, some time after her arrest in August 1943. From the Detroit News Collection, [Walter P. Reuther Library](#), Wayne State University.

Countess Grace Buchanan-Dineen, child of a prominent Rosedale family, lived a glamorous life in Detroit during the Second World War. Beautiful and cosmopolitan, she rapidly “became a social favorite,” one observer recalled, as she regaled them with anecdotes about her decade spent in Europe as the continent descended into war. Then, in late August 1943, her high-profile arrest on espionage charges shocked Detroit and Toronto with the revelation that the countess had been a Nazi spy, gathering intelligence on U.S. war production and defence capabilities as head of a spy ring. Though she’d turned FBI informant, Buchanan-Dineen faced the possibility of trading her mink coats and jewels for a long term in prison clothes—or even the death penalty. One senior FBI official found the plot “so fantastic” that it sounded “like storybook reading.” But, in reality, it was something straight out of a Hitchcock film.

FBI Tells How It Used Spy To Trap Nazi Espionage Ring

Special Correspondence

DETROIT, Aug. 25.—FBI agents told today how they trapped a handsome Canadian-born heiress as a spy, then used her as a counter-spy to trap an espionage ring charged with transmitting military information to Germany.

Pleading not guilty of wartime espionage, which carries the death penalty, were:

¶ Grace Buchanan-Dineen, 34, native of Toronto, who claims to be a French Countess, who aided the FBI when trapped.

¶ Mrs. Theresa Behrens, 44, German-Hungarian secretary of the Detroit International Center, YWCA, described as Miss Buchanan-Dineen's accomplice.

¶ Dr. Fred William Thomas, 44, a Detroit surgeon.

A merchant seaman named Ber-

trand Stuart Hoffmann, 27, was in custody in New York, and two alien women, described as Germans,

were held on Presidential warrants.

FBI spokesmen said Miss Buchanan-Dineen was recruited in Budapest in the Summer of 1941 by Sari Dehajek, Hungarian exchange student and Vassar graduate, who had lectured widely in this country on Hungarian folklore.

She entered the country on Oct. 27, 1941, by Atlantic Clipper, coming to the FBI's attention in November, 1941.

With Miss Buchanan-Dineen's aid, the FBI said, they obtained evidence showing that the ring operated in war plants and military bases in Michigan, Ohio and Illinois, transmitting information on production and movement of war materials, location of war production plants and movements of troops.



Grace Buchanan-Dineen

New York PM (August 25, 1943) via [Fulton History](#).

Returning home to Toronto after serving time for her crimes, Grace Buchanan-Dineen expressed her desire, as the *Toronto Star* paraphrased, to "begin working on a novel or a series of short stories on the last 10 years of her life," detailing her exploit in espionage and intrigue. Although no such stories were ever published, it was a fitting ambition because Buchanan-Dineen's life as a spy had been about crafting fictions.

She used her own name, but the version of her biography the FBI assembled for the press—presumably with her cooperation—was filled with half-truths and obfuscations. Buchanan was, in fact, her middle name—one she shared with her father, Fran Buchanan Dineen, in honour of his mother's maiden name. But she hyphenated her name or, at least, she never seems to have corrected the countless FBI agents and reporters who did. She was commonly described as a Countess, whose great-grandfather had been the last Count De Neen of Brittany, and was said to be born to French-Canadian parents in Toronto. That she was born in Toronto was true—on May 23, 1909. But no one else in her family ever seems to have claimed roots in the French nobility—or, in fact, to be anything other than plain Irish. If the family had ancestors in the nobility, it was likely further back in her family tree. Her grandfather, William D. Dineen, was a self-made man, in the common telling of her family's history.



(Left: Cartoon of William Dineen by Newton McConnell. From *Torontonians: As We See 'Em* [Canada Newspaper Cartoonists' Association, 1905])

Born in Ireland, Dineen had been brought to Toronto as a baby by his family in the late 1830s. In the 1860s, he opened a hatter and furrier business, the W. and D. Dineen Company. As the business expanded from retail to wholesaling, and profits increased, the company moved to a modern, new headquarters in the building that **still bears the family name** at the northwest corner of Yonge and Temperance.

A hands-on entrepreneur, William Dineen showed up every day to open the company's showroom for business well into his late 80s. Something of his character is revealed by the fact that on one occasion in 1923, after he was seriously injured in an automobile accident, he sued not only the other driver but also his own son—Grace's father—in whose car he was a passenger. He did testify, however, that he was on "good terms" with his son. Even though four of his five sons held positions in



the family businesses, the patriarch never really stepped back from day-to-day operations, catching a chill at the office and succumbing to pneumonia in October 1925.

Frank took over as president of the W. and D. Dineen Company, and his brother, W.F., assumed control of the wholesale operation. But they don't seem to have inherited their father's knack for business. Before long, the company was advertising the first of several massive sales

over the next few years, clearing out merchandise in an effort to quickly raise funds to settle William Dineen's estate. By the fall of 1928, the family businesses were in bankruptcy proceedings. Creditors blamed Frank Dineen for mismanagement because he'd hired a part-time bookkeeper at only \$1 per hour to handle affairs for a large, bustling business. Dineen was forced to publicly acknowledge his short-comings as an entrepreneur: "I know nothing of books or bookkeeping. I don't understand them." The sons were never able to extricate themselves from the nearly \$200,000 their father had guaranteed would be repaid to two local banks, and the businesses were wound down.



Where Grace Buchanan-Dineen resided in her youth. Crescent Road, near Yonge Street, in Rosedale, ca. 1910. From the City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 503.

Little is known of Grace Buchanan-Dineen's childhood and upbringing, or whether it provides clues to her motives for espionage. But she enjoyed social and economic privilege, living in Rosedale, where Crescent Road intersects Yonge Street. Her summer days may have been spent at her grandfather's summer house on the beach at Kew Gardens. She was devoted to her Catholic faith, as she would be throughout her life. Years later, she was remembered in the local papers "as a beautiful, well-mannered girl."

At some point, her parents separated, and she moved to Europe with her father. He would've already had personal connections overseas if he, like his father, had made annual buying trips to Leipzig, London, and Saint Petersburg to acquire furs for the family business. Buchanan-Dineen was educated at the Sacré Coeur Convent in Toulouse, France, until 1929. There for the next nine years, she and her father resided in London, while her younger sister, Peg, remained in Toronto with their mother. Now in her 20s, Buchanan-Dineen travelled widely in Europe, a *bonne vivante* in the glamorous salons of Paris, Vienna and London, with men gathering round wherever she went.

In the early winter of 1938, she and her father relocated to Budapest. He'd been suffering ill-health for some time, and they

chose the Hungarian capital for its many health springs. Despite some initial restorative benefits from the spas, Frank Dineen died that June. Grace returned to Toronto to settle her father's estate and to visit her mother and Peg, who had just married meteorologist Wilfred E. Turnbull.

(Right: Grace Buchanan-Dineen. Photo dated October 29, 1947. From the Detroit News Collection, *Walter P. Reuther Library*, Wayne State University.)

Soon back in Europe, she returned to Budapest, engaging fully into the colourful social life of that city. In the spring of 1941—perhaps even sooner—she crossed paths with Sari De Hajek, an attractive, exuberant blonde of about the same age. Buchanan-Dineen was fascinated by De Hajek, a Hungarian national and a graduate of Vassar College. For the past few years, De Hajek had toured the States widely, giving lectures promoting Hungarian folk arts and dance, while her much older husband, Guyula Rozinek, worked in factories.

As the couple drew Buchanan-Dineen into their confidence, they revealed the true reason for their return to Hungary: They were Nazi spies, who'd been gathering intelligence in America until Rozinek was recognized by a coworker as a former officer in the German army and deported in late May 1941. They proposed that Buchanan-Dineen become a spy herself. She readily agreed.

Ideologically, De Hajek and Rozinek were dyed-in-the-wool Nazis. "Hitler is not only my Fuehrer," Rozinek had proudly proclaimed in the U.S., "but my God." Buchanan-Dineen's beliefs were more nebulous. "I was convinced that national socialism would save France," she later explained her reason for becoming a spy. "I was not particularly concerned with the movement in other countries." If

her support for the cause seemed qualified, however, consider that she continued as a spy despite that fact that, apart from an advance of \$2,500, Buchanan-Dineen never received any of the promised \$500 monthly instalments. The account from which the payments were to be made was frozen by American authorities upon their entry into the war.

She had, it was later learned, been exposed to far right movements over the course of her decade in Europe. She moved in the same circles as Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists; she interacted with the Croix-de-Feu, an ultranationalist organization in France; and she admitted interest in "the French Royalist movement," likely a reference to *Action Française*, a political movement that supported Vichy France during the Second World War. While it is unclear when she first referred to herself as countess, the fact that she adopted the title suggests that Buchanan-Dineen possessed a sense of social superiority. How much of a push would've been required for the jump to believing in racial superiority?

Travelling to Berlin, Buchanan-Dineen learned spycraft from "crack Nazi instructors." She trained in the use of invisible ink, the means to recruit operatives and collect vital information, the technical aspects of micro-photography, and the cultivation of a cover to give a pretext to her movements and activities around the country. Before her departure, De Hajek had given her a small black-and-green checkered notebook with names and contact details of 200 people she could call upon for assistance in 30 cities from coast to coast—each name carefully annotated with "how each was to be greeted by Miss Buchanan-Dineen."





Detail of a Boeing 314 Clipper in flight, ca. 1941. From the Library of Congress via [WikiMedia Commons](#).

Boarding a Pan Am Clipper flying boat in Lisbon, [Buchanan-Dineen](#) touched down in New York City on October 27, 1941. A few days later, she arrived in Detroit, her ultimate destination. At first, she wasn't impressed by the Motor City, and stayed only a day or two at a time on initial trips. Not realizing the city's importance to the Allied cause, she later admitted, she preferred to spend most of her time in New York and Washington.

Even before the U.S. entered the war, Detroit was booming as a major centre of American defence production—the “Arsenal of Democracy,” as the press dubbed it, invoking a term from one of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s fireside chats. The concentration of defence industries in and around Detroit, Buchanan-Dineen soon understood, made it an attractive target for espionage. And the thousands of new faces flooding into town for jobs in aircraft and weapons factories and in chemical plants operated by General Motors, Ford, and Westinghouse ensured a newcomer like Buchanan-Dineen didn’t seem out of place when she moved there permanently, taking an apartment at 7716 East Jefferson Street. Located next to Brodhead Nava Armory, near the Belle Isle bridge, her apartment looked across the Detroit River to the Canadian shore.



Detail of Grace Buchanan-Dineen's apartment building, listed as 7716 East Jefferson Avenue in newspapers (but which appears to be [7700 East Jefferson](#) in the present-day). From the Detroit News Collection, [Walter P. Reuther Library](#), Wayne State University.

Buchanan-Dineen set to work assembling her ring of confidantes and conspirators from among the sizeable German ethnic population in the American Midwest. Because some of these had been alienated by anti-German sentiment on the American home front during the First World War and others brought fascist beliefs while immigrating in the 1920s and 1930s, a number of regional and national organizations emerged to promote National Socialism. There was no shortage of sympathizers ready to aid Buchanan-Dineen and the Fatherland.

On her arrival in Detroit, Buchanan-Dineen telephoned Theresa Behrens, a friend of De Hajek. Born in 1898 to German parents in Yugoslavia, Behrens immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager, settling in Detroit. She and her husband were both naturalized citizens, but she hoped to return to at war's end. Describing her as "[s]hrewd, non-descript," *Time* (September 6, 1943) called Behrens "the real-life version of the colorless character which seasoned spy-thriller readers have learned to watch with misgivings."

Next to Buchanan-Dineen—perhaps even more so—Behrens was the most important participant in the ring. Known in the Detroit area as "that nice social worker," Behrens' role as secretary at the International Center of the YWCA brought her into contact with recent immigrants and others in need. But Behrens was avowedly and "violently pro-German" in outlook. "I am 100 per cent for Hitler," she once said of her long-standing views. "If Hitler wins, all those small countries in Europe will have their freedom." And she used her YWCA position to disseminate the Nazi ideology among the ethnic Germans she encountered, actively identifying and recruiting new sources for Buchanan-Dineen's ring.



The East Detroit neighbourhood where Grace Buchanan-Dineen lived. Her apartment was just east of the Belle Isle Bridge (at bottom left). Detail of [USGS Map](#), 1938, from [Old Maps Online](#).

After their first meeting, Behrens introduced Buchanan-Dineen to Dr. Fred W. Thomas, her doctor and a friend who, like her, lived in the East English Village neighbourhood. After finishing his medical education at the University of Michigan in 1926, the Ohio native spent a year on exchange as a surgeon in Hamburg. During his time in Europe, he and his wife travelled extensively before returning to open his medical practice in Detroit's [Eaton Tower](#). The obstetrician and surgeon was a well-connected proponent of Nazism, who was close with leaders of the German-American Bund, like Fritz Kuhn and Gerhard Wilhelm Kunze, as well as with Fritz Heiler, the German Consul in Detroit. The Bund, a nation-wide body established in 1936 to

foster National Socialism on American shores, envisioned itself as protecting the U.S. “from Jewish-communist plots and black cultural influences such as jazz music,” as [historian Mark D. Van Ells](#) put it. The organization staged high-profile pro-Hitler rallies and hosted summer camps for youth and, with a paramilitary wing, the Bund used intimidation against legitimate German cultural societies resistant to adopting Nazi ideology. Bund events were highly visible, attracting protestors and sometimes resulting in street violence.

Thomas was a rabid proponent of the Bund’s cause, and a regular speaker at their events. Over an extended period in 1938-1939, he harassed a prominent Jewish religious leader. Whenever the rabbi spoke publicly in favour of a boycott on German-made products, Thomas was there promoting Nazism and defending its anti-Semitism. In 1939, a fiery speech Thomas made at a German picnic cost him supplementary income when he was fired as medical examiner for an insurance company. The openness of Thomas’s associations and attitudes, the authorities told the press, meant that he’d “long been known to the FBI in Detroit.” Like many other Bund members, Thomas was an easy target for federal authorities, who had begun compiling dossiers on Nazi sympathizers as potential subversives long before US neutrality ceased.

Another participant in the spy ring, Marianna Von Moltke—a bona fide Countess of German extraction—introduced Buchanan Dineen to potential contacts and sources of information. Once been business manager of a poetry magazine in Chicago, as a housewife in Detroit, Von Moltke had raised the family’s four children, two of whom were living in Germany by the outbreak of the war. She lived near the Wayne University campus, where her husband was an instructor of German literature. A fervent believer “that Hitler is the savior of the world” and that Germany would unify the world, according to FBI findings, Von Moltke had been accused of trying to teach her husband’s students Nazi songs to stir up their racial animus.



Emma Elise Leonhardt shortly after her arrest, August 25, 1943. From the Detroit News Collection, [Walter P. Reuther Library](#), Wayne State University.

The inner circle was rounded out with Emma Elise and Carl John Wilhelm Leonhardt. A former officer in the German army, Carl had been among the founders of the Nazi movement in Detroit. His wife was known as “Mamma” to the rest of the spy ring and was, like Von Moltke, a German national. One of their daughters had married an exchange student and returned with him to Germany, where he rose to the senior ranks of the Nazi Party; another lived in Berlin, working in the German war effort. The couple’s rooming house at 3521 Garland Avenue was the ring’s primary meeting place—just 2.5 miles north of Buchanan-Dineen’s apartment—and a safe space where they could openly express their admiration of Nazi violence and racial superiority. (The Leonhardts’ rooming house was, in fact, well-known among German spies and saboteurs, and found listed among the belongings of eight enemy agents landed by U-Boat off Long Island and Florida in June 1942.)

The members of Buchanan-Dineen's ring gathered intelligence on the location and production figures of industrial plants and factories of companies like the Pullman Company in Chicago, Westinghouse Electric in Ohio, and the Ford Company's operations, including its Willow Run bomber production facility. They also reported on nitroglycerin plants, and the movement of the goods produced, as well as details of troop activities at naval and army bases across Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois. Following the common spycraft of the time, Buchanan-Dineen typed innocent letters, discussing mundane matters, but secretly inserted the information gleaned from her operatives in invisible ink between the typed lines using a toothpick wrapped in cotton. To get them overseas, she sent the reports to mail drops, addresses in neutral countries from which couriers forwarded them to German intelligence.

Beyond the circle of pro-Nazi operatives, Buchanan-Dineen charmed her way into Detroit society. The beautiful brunette's education and spirited personality won her many friends among the upper crust in the Midwest, who found in her "an excellent conversationalist." Though the 32-year-old carried herself with an aristocratic demeanour, speaking "with a dash of British accent"—even though she insisted upon the French pronunciation of "Grawse"—such haughtiness seemed to them to suit her title as countess.

Buchanan-Dineen was always impeccably put together and ostentatious. As fitting the scion of a pre-eminent hatter and furrier family, she was almost always seen in a mink coat, silver fox jacket, or Persian lamb coat, paired with hats, scarves, muffs, and stoles of the same materials. Despite wartime rationing, her fashionable wardrobe included 40 pairs of nylon hose and 41 pairs of shoes. Her jewelry collection comprised 27 rings set with diamonds and other precious stones, 31 bracelets, 2 pairs of earrings, three sets of pearls, three necklaces, three 18-karat gold watches, and "more than two dozen locketts, pendants and other gewgaws of a similar nature." Buchanan-Dineen's life was one of leisure, with nights out to dine at the city's toniest clubs, or sipping sherry at parties she frequently hosted at her apartment, although she balanced it by maintaining her life-long religious devotion. "Never," one investigator recalled, "has a woman made so many acquaintances in Detroit in such a short time."

(Right: *Toronto Star* [December 10, 1941])

In addition to judging fashion shows, appearing on the radio, and addressing the YWCA's charm school, Buchanan-Dineen entertained women's groups and societies with lectures describing what she called "the amusing side" of life in wartime Europe. Her standard topics included "Women in War Torn Europe," "I Saw the Nazis in Central Europe," and "Into the Light of Freedom." Some speeches were at charity events, like one she gave at a benefit for the Red Cross British Bomb Victims' Fund during a visit to Toronto in late 1941 and early 1942.

During that trip, an anecdote shared on the women's page of the *Star*—about her being only the fourth British woman issued an Italian visa since the start of war—is suggestive of the content of her speeches. Seeking to return to North America via Italy and Lisbon, the story went, Buchanan-Dineen had had her jewelry taken from her by government officials at a Rome airport. When it came time to leave for Lisbon a day-and-a-half later, she demanded it back. "I'm sorry, madam, but your jewelry is in a strong box in Rome," an official politely responded. With the plane due to depart in mere minutes, she insisted that she wouldn't leave without "the Dineen heirloom jewelry," accusing the Italian authorities of being thieves, as an American ambassador and his wife—also passengers for Lisbon—looked on. Eventually relenting to the headstrong woman, an Italian official drove into town and returned with her belongings. A Romanian politician's wife and daughter caught in the same circumstance lost their valuables because, someone told Buchanan-Dineen, "[t]hey were not so aggressive as you were."

The episode—likely embellished, possibly even invented—portrayed Buchanan-Dineen as engaging in a dramatic but consequence-free adventure, while gaining the upper hand on a representative of an Axis enemy. On one hand, this yarn undoubtedly entertained her audiences; on the other, it earned Buchanan-Dineen credibility as someone with strength of character in the face of fascist

FAMOUS TORONTONIAN AIDS BOMB VICTIM

Grace Buchanan-Dineen, Distinguished Lecturer, to Describe Warring Europe



Born in Toronto, Grace Buchanan-Dineen, lecturer, is coming to Toronto Dec. 20 and later will speak here for the benefit of the Red Cross British Bomb Victims' fund. Miss Buchanan-Dineen returned to this continent from Europe via clipper Oct. 27. She was educated at the Convent Sacre Coeur in Toronto. She lived with her father in London, England, 1929-1933, and was in Budapest February to June 1938. She travelled throughout Europe in 1939 and has lived in different parts of Europe since. She returned through Italy and was the fourth British woman to have an Italian visa on her passport since the beginning of hostilities. Her lecture topics are as follows: "Women in War Torn Europe," "On the Dark Side," "The Oppression of War," "Into the Light of Freedom," "I Saw the Nazis in Central Europe," and "Behind the War Lines."

authoritarianism: an ideal way of disguising that your loyalties lay with the fascists.

Not all her lectures had such political undertones, however. She beguiled women's clubs in Detroit "with her chatty, unprofitable, talks on foreign affairs," *Newsweek* (September 6, 1943) later reported. None of her audiences or acquaintances would have suspected that she was operating as an enemy agent. But, in reality, the FBI was closing in on her ring.



Men and women turning out parts for bomber planes at Ford's Willow Run plant, ca. July 1942. From the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration via [WikiMedia Commons](#).

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI was retooling from its focus on gangsters and racketeers to national security, investigating saboteurs and spies targeting American technological prowess. Between 1938 and 1939, the number of espionage cases handled by the FBI jumped 600 per cent. By necessity, the number of agents grew by similar ratios, from just 832 agents in 1939 to 4,600 by December 1943. All agents, who were university graduates in law or accounting as a prerequisite for the job, received extensive training in scientific investigative methods and counter-espionage tactics, according to the FBI's publicity.

All Pan-Am Clippers were required to stop in Bermuda en route to or from Europe, so all transatlantic airmail could be scrutinized by staff of the British Security Coordination, many of them young university-educated women, ensconced in a beachfront hotel turned **counter-espionage hub**. The staff intercepted and examined letters destined for addresses suspected of being espionage fronts, using chemical agents to make invisible ink messages reappear. As Nadia Gardner, one of the workers, later testified in court, at least one of Buchanan-Dineen's early dispatches to a Lisbon mail drop got caught in the British censors' net. Some of the addresses the countess was using, it turned out, had already been compromised through earlier espionage investigations.

When the FBI received leads from the British, often the only clue to the identity of the sender or their return address was the postmark on the envelope. From that starting point, according to a *Popular Science* (October 1943) account of a similar case, federal agents would interview postmen and, over the course of months, patiently narrow down their search street by street to find their suspect. Calling upon a range of technical experts, the FBI could also analyze paper stock and handwriting for clues. So, while federal agents became aware of a mysterious "Miss Smith" in Detroit as early as November 1941, it took them some time for investigators to unmask her as Buchanan-Dineen.

On March 5, 1942, in New York City, FBI agents quietly arrested Buchanan-Dineen. Forbidden from using “third-degree methods” of interrogation—at least according to G-men publicity—agents would’ve confronted her with the evidence assembled against her, and perhaps left her “alone with a package of cigarettes to think it over.” Facing the prospect of a long prison sentence and the realization “that she could [no longer] carry out the instructions of her Nazi employers,” as a FBI dossier put it, Buchanan-Dineen accepted an FBI offer to turn counter-agent. “I voluntarily took the job of counter-espionage,” she later explained. “No promise of immunity was made to me, but I was convinced in an hour that there was no future for me as a German agent.”

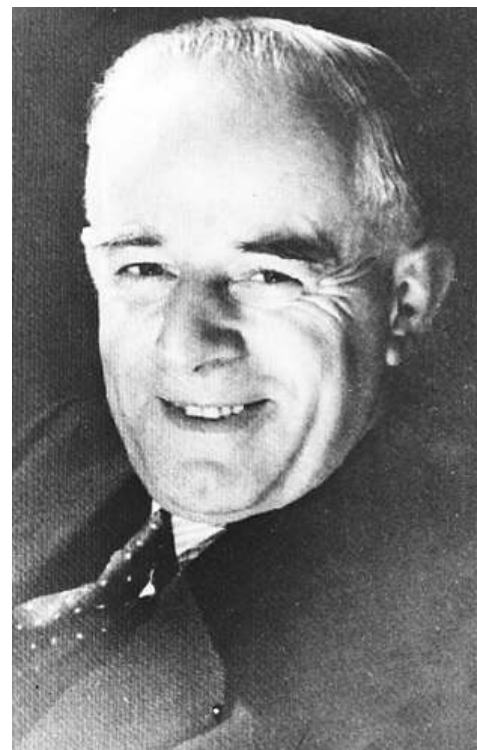
*(Right: Nelson E. Butler, fiancé of Grace Buchanan-Dineen. Photo dated October 29, 1947. From the Detroit News Collection, **Walter P. Reuther Library**, Wayne State University.)*

From that moment on, she cooperated fully with American authorities. The ring operated as before. Continued to meet with her contacts dozens of times, and they continued gathering and supplying her intelligence. Only now, all of her activities, and those of her contacts, were under constant monitoring of FBI men. Her apartment was outfitted with a two-way mirror (or another sort of “secret aperture”), allowing agents to observe her visitors from an adjacent unit. She continued sending dispatches through the usual mail-drop technique, but the only information passed along to her Nazi masters was that which had been vetted by the FBI, in coordination with military and naval intelligence services. Any replies received from overseas, she shared with her new handlers.

Apart from assisting agents in assembling evidence against her co-conspirators, Buchanan-Dineen maintained her cover story social life. She even met Nelson E. Butler, a Detroit businessman several years her senior, and a native of Cobourg, Ontario. Though she kept her double life a secret, fearing that he’d leave her if he knew the truth, the couple fell deeply in love, and got engaged in the summer of 1943.

Just a few weeks later, on August 24, FBI men roused her early in the morning hours and arrested her. Simultaneously, agents arrested Behrens and Dr. Thomas as spies. At their initial arraignment, Buchanan-Dineen was silent but for one statement reported by the press: “I have no wish to consult an attorney for I have nothing to say.” Bail for each of the three was set at \$50,000, an astronomical sum none of them could secure.

On the same day, Von Moltke and Emma Leonhardt, as German nationals, were picked up as enemy aliens. Fingerprinted at the FBI’s downtown offices, they were taken to the Immigration Detention Home to await an appearance before Detroit’s Alien Enemy Hearing Board. Another of the ring’s confederates, Bertrand Stuart Hoffman, was arrested in New York City and transported to Detroit. A merchant marine seaman, Hoffman reported information on naval bases and convoy movements to Buchanan-Dineen via coded telegrams while waiting to be assigned a ship.





Detail of Grace Buchanan-Dineen, at the offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Detroit, ca. August 1943. From the Detroit News Collection, [Walter P. Reuther Library](#), Wayne State University.

Almost immediately, fall-out of the case played out on the newspaper page. Dr. Thomas's wife was "stunned" by his arrest, informing any reporter who would listen that they were American-born citizens. "I refuse to believe there is a word of truth in these charges against him. I can imagine nothing lower than any one who would sell out his country," she insisted. U.S. District Attorney John C. Lehr retorted, however, that Dr. Thomas was someone "with a keen, shrewd, crafty and analytical mind who has sold out his country."

In its initial statements to the press on August 24, federal authorities trumpeted Buchanan-Dineen's role as a counter-spy who'd provided the evidence against the others, but claiming that the question of whether to show her any mercy was for the courts to decide. In other espionage cases, prosecutors had kept the cooperation of defendants secret in order to protect family members still resident in Germany. Perhaps, in this case, the FBI intended to demonstrate that the spy ring's activities had been discovered early and provided little of value to Germany.

In Detroit, reaction was swift and harsh. Members of some local women's leagues and societies who'd hosted Buchanan-Dineen's talks felt betrayed. Calling the leader of the spy ring "a weak, artificial creature," one club's representative told *Newsweek* (September 6, 1943) Buchanan-Dineen deserved "to be strung up." The Toronto press heartily acknowledged her as "a former Toronto woman," and carried stories of her arrest and court appearances. But the *Star* and *Globe* also simply repeated aspects of her biography reported elsewhere—like her being a "Countess"—that should've been easy for them to disprove or clarify. These papers never interviewed her sister, uncles, or cousins about their now-famous relation, for instance. Nor did they dig into her past to flesh out her upbringing or personal connections in the city.



Detail of Grace Buchanan-Dineen, some time after her arrest in August 1943. From the Detroit News Collection, [Walter P. Reuther Library](#), Wayne State University.

Serving as the government's primary witness, Buchanan-Dineen testified in closed-door grand jury deliberations over a series of days in early September. Under questioning of the prosecutor, she detailed her part in the espionage plot and the roles played by compatriots. The grand jury's findings, reported on September 17, outlined 47 specific acts, stretching as far back as Rozinek's 1938 arrival in the States, that were committed by 24 co-conspirators, most of whom were overseas, acting as mail-drop forwarders or Buchanan-Dineen's superiors in the German espionage apparatus. The six already in custody—Buchanan-Dineen, Behrens, Emma Leonhardt, Hoffman, Dr. Thomas, and Von Moltke—were charged with conspiracy to collect and communicate to Germany information vital to "the national defense of the United States with intent to injure this country and to the advantage of the Nazi government." Just before the grand jury reported, Leonhardt's husband as well as Walter Joseph Abt, a research engineer and a regular tenant of their rooming house, were arrested. By the end of the same afternoon these two pleaded guilty to the same charges.

For the members of the ring who maintained their innocence the three-and-a-half weeks spent in the Wayne County Jail since their arrest had been agonizing. On September 1, a distraught Behrens promised "to tell 'many things the Government ought to know,' in exchange for her freedom," according to the *Detroit News*. "I don't want to go to court. I don't want to testify," she pleaded desperately with the FBI. "But I do know a lot of important things, and I will tell them if I can be assured of my freedom." But she couldn't secure a plea deal. Having refused food for most of her time in custody, Behrens was so weakened by the time she was formally indicted on September 22, she needed the assistance of a prison matron and a nurse to get from her hospital bed to the courtroom. Remaining silent as a verdict of not guilty was registered on her behalf, Behrens fainted during the proceedings.



Detail of Countess Marianna Von Moltke, August 26, 1943. From the Detroit News Collection, [Walter P. Reuther Library](#), Wayne State University.)

On her arrival at the Immigration Detention Home in late August, Von Moltke had been placed in isolation. Told only that she was being held indefinitely “as a dangerous enemy alien,” Von Moltke was allowed to speak with anyone but prison matrons and FBI agents. She didn’t even see her husband until September 28. Von Moltke had great difficulty trying to secure legal representation. Because her husband had lost his job as a result of her highly publicized arrest, they couldn’t afford a lawyer. He arranged for some lawyer friends to visit his wife, but they demurred from acting for her officially because it wasn’t their area of specialization.

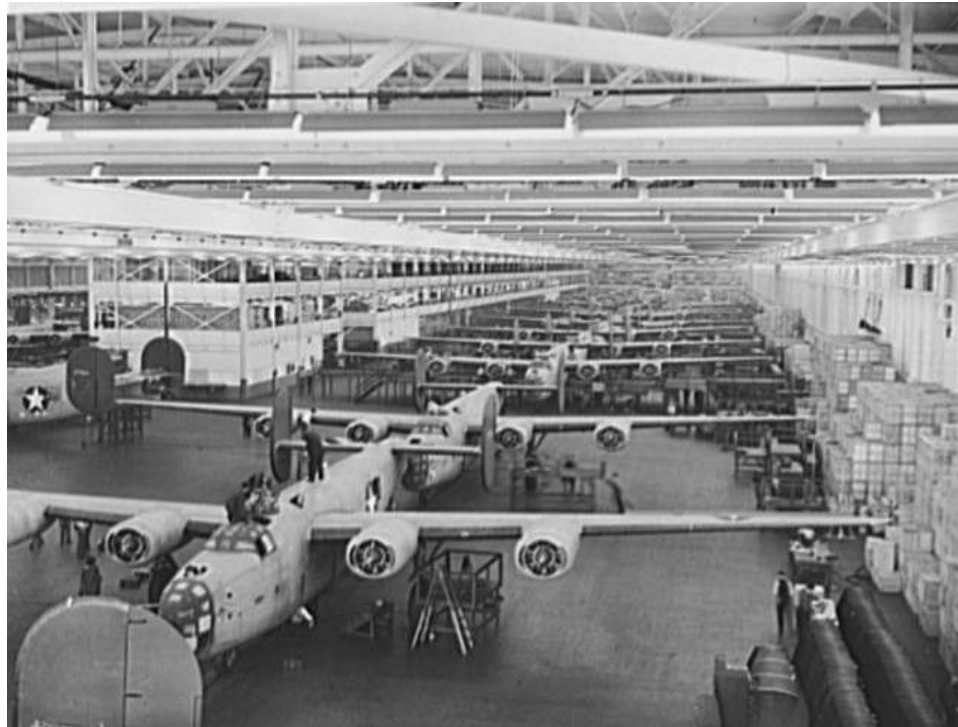
Without reliable counsel, Von Moltke hounded visiting FBI agents with questions about her situation and the implications of the conspiracy charge. She worried her “mere association” with the other defendants was enough to prove her own guilt, and expressed fear about being deported. And, most importantly, she wanted to find a course of action that might allow her husband to reclaim his position at the university. One agent did provide some explanations and advice that “was, though honestly given, false,” in a later court’s estimation.

In court on October 7, Von Moltke formally waived her right to counsel and, without promise of leniency, she pleaded guilty. By then Emma Leonhardt and Behrens had already pleaded guilty, and all Von Moltke wanted was to serve her sentence near her family. Eventually, Buchanan-Dineen pleaded guilty as well. Like the others, she did so without benefit of a lawyer even though, between her and her fiancé, she had the resources to afford one. It was no insignificant matter that they’d failed to protect their own interests because the charges carried a maximum of 30 years imprisonment or even the death penalty, but their guilty pleas included no reassurances about sentencing from authorities. It’s possible that, like Von Moltke and Behrens, Buchanan-Dineen had trouble finding a lawyer willing to risk their personal and professional reputation defending a spy in a time of war.

The only two defendants not to plead guilty, Dr. Thomas and Hoffman, proceeded to trial in mid-January 1944. Buchanan-Dineen appeared on the witness stand on January 20 in a striking grey wool suit, with mink hat and muff. For the next several days, she coolly outlined the details of her life since meeting De Hajek. Specific to Thomas, she recounted at least 30 meetings at his doctor’s office between October 1942 and August 1943—and three meetings at her apartment—during which the obstetrician shared information on Detroit factories, labour strife, and Coast Guard activities from “dissatisfied war workers and other sources,” including his patients.

Although Thomas denied any involvement in espionage activities and insisted he had no more than a doctor-patient

relationship with her, Buchanan-Dineen painted a picture of him as a willing participant. Thomas was so enthusiastic about the Third Reich, she testified, he wanted the spy ring's operatives to sabotage a plant in Cleveland, and the Willow Run factory where Ford was building B-24 Bombers.



Production of B-24E Bombers at Ford's Willow Run plant, Michigan. From the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division ([fsa 8b05939](#)).

Defense attorney Walter M. Nelson asked whether Buchanan-Dineen, in turning counter-spy, had entrapped his client. "I was to continue as before," she responded, explaining her instructions from the FBI. "I did not seek him out to get information. He made the dates with me." Growing irritated by Nelson's cross-examination into her associations with far right movements in Europe, she answered in "in precise, clipped words," as one reporter noted.

While Buchanan-Dineen made no secret of the ideological allegiance she held upon arrival in the United States, since her arrest she'd stated that the bombing attack on Pearl Harbor caused her to lose faith in Nazism. Now, Nelson elicited from her the admission of her continued allegiances. "I am in sympathy with the objectives of the Nazis," she testified. She had, however, "grown to be very fond of this country and its many kindnesses," she added in reply to another question.

"You have only her word," Nelson insisted to the jury, arguing Buchanan-Dineen's testimony did not prove Thomas's involvement in the plot. After extensive deliberations—resulting from confusion created by misstatements the judge made in instructions to jurors—the jury found Thomas guilty on February 24. A few weeks later, Thomas was sentenced to 16 years. Charges against Hoffman had been dismissed because he was declared mentally unfit to assist in his own defence.



(Left: *Toronto Star* [January 26, 1944])

On March 25, the five who had pleaded guilty finally received their sentences. Behrens, who the court declared to be "the heart and soul of the espionage conspiracy in Detroit," engaged in a long argument with the judge. She insisted that her guilty plea was merely an admission she *knew* the others, not that she had participated in espionage. "The record of the court shows," the judge had the last word, "that you promoted this conspiracy to a great extent. Fortunately there is no evidence that information as to our defense plants or troop or ship movements did reach the enemy." On hearing her 20-year sentence pronounced, Behrens collapsed in the courtroom. Carl J.W. Leonhardt and Abt were each given 10 years, and Emma E. Leonhardt, five years. (Von Moltke's sentencing was deferred because, outside of the public

stand to face further cross-examination by Walter Nelson, defence attorney.

Nelson introduced the names of Sir Oswald Mosley, British Fascist leader and Pierre Laval, the French Quisling, but the "countess" denied knowing them personally.

She is the government's star witness in the espionage trial of Dr. Fred W. Thomas, Detroit physician, and Bertrand Hoffman, former merchant seaman.

"Countess" Appears Angry

The "countess" appeared angry at Nelson's line of questioning and gave her answers in precise, clipped words.

"Do you know Sir Oswald Mosley," Nelson asked.

"Not personally. I know people associated with him."

"Did you know he was affiliated with the Nazi group?"

"If you care to call it so."

"Do you know Pierre Laval?"

"I heard of him, but I don't know him."

eye, she'd declared her innocence, claiming her guilty plea had been a result of FBI coercion.)

Buchanan-Dineen, as ringleader, was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment, a surprisingly stiff sentence given that'd she'd cooperated with the government as both counter-agent and key witness. The fact that she had come to the country "as a Nazi spy," the judge ruled, outweighed any consideration of leniency. "I didn't think they would give me such a sentence," Buchanan-Dineen was heard complaining afterward. "I'm very surprised." Years later, she characterized the sentence as a "betrayal," suggesting that she'd expected more mercy.

Back at the Wayne County Jail, where they were taken to await transfer to federal prison, any remnants of friendship between the defendants devolved into venomous fighting. Behrens' outrage echoed across the sixth floor. "I wouldn't mind—," she screamed towards the others. "I wouldn't mind if I had done something to deserve this. I'm an American citizen, and they gave me 20 years and that skunk down there isn't a citizen and she gets 12 years."

Buchanan-Dineen, ever poised, calmly turned to a prison matron. "They won't put me in with those other women, will they?" she asked. Reassured by the response, the "Countess" became more concerned by the realization that she would be expected to clean her own cell. "Oh. I don't know," she was heard to say. "I've never done much of that." She served her sentence at the federal women's reformatory in Alderson, West Virginia.



Administration building at the Federal Reformatory for Women, Alderson, West Virginia. From the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division ([HABS WVA,45-ALD.V,1-A-1](#))

Never deserting his love, Butler had been there to support his fiancée in the courtroom. After her sentencing, he simply said, "I'll wait." Now he wrote faithfully every day, mailed care packages each week, and visited her twice a month. He promised that they would marry as soon as she was released. "With her wealth, position, beauty, and glamour vanished," *Newsweek* (November 10, 1947) wrote in a profile of Buchanan-Dineen that painted her as a tragic, star-crossed figure, the hope instilled by Butler's love "was all that remained." He died of a heart attack in late October 1947, and was buried back home in Cobourg. "She called from the prison a few days after Butler died," Butler's attorney said. "She seemed broken-hearted."

Adding to her pain was the announcement less than a month later that Buchanan-Dineen would be granted early parole. Earlier that year, President Harry Truman had commuted Buchanan-Dineen's sentence to nine years, making her eligible for parole, which was granted that November on the condition that she be immediately deported to Canada. Her release from

prison, however, was delayed for months because officials thought they would need her testimony again.

The Supreme Court **found enough cause** to Von Moltke's allegations of "coercion, intimidation, and deception" by FBI agents in securing her guilty plea to rule, in January 1948, that her claims be investigated further by a lower court. Behrens, too, **pursue several appeals**—ultimately unsuccessful—on the same grounds. Von Moltke's guilty plea was eventually upheld and she eventually ordered to finish her four-year sentence. On her release, she and her husband changed their names to Miller and opened a candy store in Detroit.

Thomas's conviction was **overturned** on the technical grounds of the trial judge's confusing instructions to the jury. A new trial was ordered, but on June 6, 1949, the U.S. government dropped its case against Dr. Thomas because, as a prosecutor explained, the "evidence available at the time of the original conviction was no longer available." Thomas **died in 1986**.

(Right: *Toronto Star* [February 19, 1948])

The authorities had released Buchanan-Dineen by the spring of 1948, having decided her testimony would not be necessary. Escorted by a U.S. marshal, the now-39-year-old arrived in Detroit on March 18 to collect the crates of clothes and jewelry her fiancé had so lovingly packed for storage. The next day, dressed sharply in a black Persian lamb coat, she crossed the border to Windsor without issue or delay since, as a law enforcement official told reporters: "She served her sentence for her crime, and as far as we're concerned, she's just another Canadian coming home."

With the help of a Windsor taxi driver racing through the streets, the self-styled "Countess" eluded pursuing journalists. Others staked out the train station, knowing she had reservations on the Canadian National Express to Toronto. As the train began rolling out and before any press could intercept, she left her hiding spot and rushed aboard the last coach. As the train disappeared into the distance, so too did Buchanan-Dineen disappear from the public record.

She'd spoken briefly to the press upon her release, giving the only indication of her post-war intentions. Returning home to Toronto would mean "starting a new life again," the *Toronto Star* paraphrased. Although she never published any stories about her experiences, as she said she would, her experiences did eventually form the basis of Margit Leische's novel, *Lipstick and Lies* (Poisoned Pen Press, 2009).

Responding to a reader inquiry about her whereabouts in February 1956, the *Star* explained simply that, since her release, she had returned to life as a private citizen. In the decades that followed, the *Star* and the *Globe* never sought her out for an interview or retrospective. Nor did she ever seek the spotlight. If she remained in Toronto, the former spy disappeared into the anonymity of life in a metropolis. Her date and place of death is unknown.

Sources consulted include: the FBI's documentation and clippings about Grace Buchanan-Dineen from the [Harold Weisberg Archive](#) and [Beneficial-Hodson Library](#), Hood College (also available as a [single download](#)); A.J. Baime, *The Arsenal of Democracy: FDR, Detroit, and an Epic Quest to Arm an America at War* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014); Mike Filey, *Toronto Sketches 8: The Way We Were* (Dundurn, 2004); A.A. Hoehling, *Women Who Spied* (Madison Books, 1967); Robert E. Quirk, ed., [When You Come Home: A Wartime Courtship in Letters, 1941-45](#) (Wayne State University Press (2007)); and articles from the *Buffalo Courier Express*, *Montreal Gazette*, *the Toronto Globe*, *the Globe and Mail*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Macleans*, *the Milwaukee Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *New York PM Daily*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, *the Toronto Star*, *Time*, and *the Chicago Tribune*.

U.S. TO FREE SPY 'COUNTESS' ALSO DEPORT HER TO CANADA

Special to The Star

Detroit, Feb. 19.—"Countess" Grace Buchanan - Dineen, 39, Toronto beauty who charmed her way into the cream of Detroit's society as head of a Nazi wartime spy ring active here, will be released from prison probably this week-end, and deported to Canada.

Richard Brondyck, chief of the U.S. immigration's deportation branch here, said today a formal order is expected momentarily from immigration authorities in Washington freeing the attractive phony courtesan.

Miss Dineen began serving her sentence for espionage March 25, 1944, following a plea of guilty. She had been sentenced to 12 years.

"She quite probably will be brought to Detroit and then escorted over the border to Windsor," immigration officials here said.

They explained her release order had been held up by the U.S. supreme court, which recently granted a new trial for Mrs. Marianna Von Moltke, another alleged Nazi spy who sought to change her plea from guilty registered here four years ago.

Miss Dineen, it was felt, would have been required as a witness in the new Von Moltke hearing. Now, authorities here said, her testimony will no longer be required.

Early in 1942, shortly after arriving here from Germany, the Toronto socialite was arrested by F.B.I. agents and charged with spying on this country for Germany—at a salary of \$500 monthly which, she testified, she never received.

F.B.I. agents testified she agreed to help the U.S. undercovermen trip up the entire German espionage ring and from then until her arrest on August 24, 1943, along with six other



GRACE BUCHANAN-DINEEN

members of the spy group, she was constantly watched by federal authorities.

IRAN EXPELS TIMES MAN

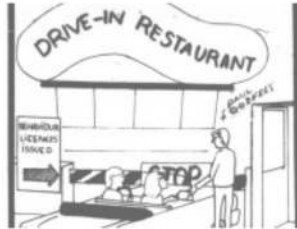
Teheran, Feb. 19.—(Reuters) — Alfred Holland, correspondent here of The Times of London, today was expelled from Iran and was given 48 hours to leave the country. On of Holland's recent dispatches The Times was understood to have brought about his expulsion.

Every Saturday, *Historicist* looks back at the events, places, and characters that have shaped Toronto into the city we know today.

TORONTOIST FAVOURITES



A Farewell From
Vandalist



Historicist: "Sip 'n Sex" -
Paul Godfrey's Origin



Riding the Union-
Pearson Express



The Eastern Commerce
Way



Mapping Where
Torontonians Bike and



Royal York: Notorious,
and Now Up for Sale



A Short History of
Toronto's Street Signs



Putting New Streetcars
to the Test



How Property Taxes
Work



Top Ten Degraffi Junior
High Hangouts



Photo Essay: Toronto's
Love of Pool-Hopping



In Search of Toronto's
Geographic Centre